A Battle I Intend to Win
Joyce Oberle, Franklin County Master Gardener

Let me begin by stating unequivocally that I am a pacifist. I abhor violence in all forms. As a longstanding vegetarian, I prefer to befriend animals rather than eat them. Now don’t misunderstand, I can easily confront flies, mosquitoes, roaches, mealy bugs, scales, etc. and always come away from our encounter as the victor.

These facts notwithstanding, I must admit that over the last few years, I have been waging a war with a foe of unbelievable strength and tenacity. The foe of which I speak is none other than the bush honeysuckle.

Several years ago as I was walking around our woods, I began to observe a tremendous amount of new growth. It seems as though it had sprung up over night. As I recall, it was in the early autumn that I observed these lovely golden yellow bushes with the scarlet red berries. Where did these numerous shrubs come from? I certainly hadn’t planted them. Why they had even overtaken one of my largest flower beds. I could hardly see anything else for the density of these mysterious shrubs that now predominated.

My curiosity finally led me to pluck a branch and visit our local Conservation Department. They are always so kind and helpful. I was certain they would recognize this stranger without a problem. Thus I began the conversation. “Can you identify this for me,” as I attempted to hand him the branch. Almost as if I had attempted to hand him a hot poker, his hand recoiled. I could see his face turn ashen while beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead. With a degree of trembling in his voice he quickly replied, “Oh my, you don’t want this growing on your land or anywhere else for that matter. This is bush honeysuckle, and it is a most invasive shrub. It will overtake anything in its path. You don’t want that plant around,” he reiterated.

Well, that was all I needed to hear. I couldn’t wait to get home and begin waging my war against this demonic intruder. Armed with chain saw, an ax, loppers, etc., I began to wage the battle. Unfortunately, I didn’t know that cutting them down wasn’t the end of the story. I later learned that they must be totally eradicated either by removing the entire plant, roots and all or by applying an herbicide. That bit of information was evident when, the following spring, I observed lots of stumps giving birth to new little sprouts. So now after the initial execution, the remaining stump receives a healthy or rather unhealthy dose of poison.

Trust me; I am a woman on a mission. My goal is to rid our property of every honeysuckle shrub. I have already destroyed a lot. In fact, when my son was home recently, he remarked with some astonishment regarding the copious amount of downed honeysuckle in neat piles waiting to be burned.

I must confess, there are still lots to be reckoned with. Time ran out with the arrival of the cold winter weather. I take heart knowing that spring is just around the corner, and I’ll be ready to take up the fight. Give me a challenge and I’ll run with it. I don’t like to lose so honeysuckle, beware. Your days are numbered.
Reflections and Resolutions
Georgianne McClanahan, Franklin County Master Gardener

In Missouri, 2008 went down as the wettest on record. We’ll all likely see some effect from the excess rainfall as we prepare for spring.

Around here the grass, the paddocks and weeds benefitted but we also saw the worst mole and vole activity in 20 years on the place. Bare areas of ground developed from runoff which will have to be dealt with. I expect some fungal issues in the iris beds. The wood fences and underside of the raised deck have already needed pressure washing as have the barn and outbuildings for greenish mildew.

Last year it was hard to keep up. When I had a day off it seemed like it was always raining or too wet to work the ground. As the season drew to a close I felt lucky just to get the summer bulbs dug and stored and the pool closed. In retrospect, other years have been hot and dry with the problems these conditions bring and over which we have no control.

Reflecting on all this brings the larger question, why do I do it? Can I keep the place respectably landscaped preferably using all organic methods? The answer to the former questions came in something my pastor said. “Most men have overfed bodies and underfed souls.” For me gardening feeds the soul.

As for the latter, a qualified yes, there is a learning curve between the lessons we get in Master Gardener classes and actually dealing successfully with the kinds of weather and soil conditions we get in Missouri (or in 2008, Misery). This season I’m scaling back by not planting anything new until what is already growing has been pruned, thinned, divided, culled, weeded, moved, sprayed, fed and mulched.

I’m enforcing strict birth control on brambles and yucca. I plan to level the organic playing field by actually putting in the greensand and rock minerals instead of naively planting and not feeding or spraying. I will only plant the “sure bets”, zinnia, marigold and miniature sunflowers. Vegetables must be hybrid resistant type varieties the more letters behind the name the better. I’ll buy only from a first rate garden center, no more ten cent seeds and I’ll be trending toward native plants.

The conditions left by a wet season are fixable. I’m an optimist (as are most gardeners), I bought a day runner to be used in tandem with an almanac so the wet days will be spent at work. I’ll even start blocking in the nice days for master gardener hours and events.

Growing Sweet Potatoes
Colleen Simons, Franklin County Master Gardener

One of the most successful vegetable crops in my garden is sweet potatoes. They not only taste good, they are good for you. A sweet potato is not a potato but is a root from the morning glory family. And even though they are often labeled “yams”, a sweet potato is not a true yam. Yams are from a different plant family and come from Africa.

I begin growing my “slips” in early April. To do this you need a good home-grown sweet potato, toothpicks, glass jar, and non-chlorinated water. Insert the toothpicks into the sides of the sweet potato about 1/3 of the way down. Place it into the jar and fill with enough water to keep the bottom 2/3’s of the potato wet, and place it in a warm, sunny window. In a few days the slip will begin to put down roots. Add water as needed, and in a few weeks it will sprout leaves from the top. When the slip is 4-6 inches long, I cut them off and root them in wet vermiculite.

Plant sweet potatoes in a sunny site with well-drained soil and a pH of 5.5-6.5. They need warm soil (about 70 degrees), so I usually plant them in late May through early June. Because of this late planting time, you can use them as a second crop in your garden. Set the slips 16 inches apart on top of a low ridge with 36 inches between rows. Water slips after planting and keep them constantly moist for at least a week for them to become well established. They will need an inch of water per week throughout the summer.

Once the plants start “vining”, lift and move the vines every two weeks to keep them from rooting at the joints. This way all of the vine’s energy will be directed to producing the vegetable instead of producing more leaves. I use a heavy mulch to prevent weeds which also keeps them from rooting at the joints.

Dig the tubers when they grow to the size that you like. You must dig them if the foliage is killed by frost. I dig early in the morning, gently wash them, and then let them dry all day on the picnic table. They are then stored in plastic crates in the basement where they keep well for a year.


Editors Note: Southern Sweep Potato Pie recipe enclosed!
From Matt’s Desk

The economic news has been less than bright in recent months and it seems it has impacted horticulture as well. Colleen Simons, Becky Joseph and I recently provided a program at Hillermann Nursery in Washington addressing the topic of vegetable gardening. I thought we might have 25 to 30. I called the day before the program and was told that 55 had signed up and they would set up chairs for 70. The night of the program we had 78 participants – some of you were there. A similar program provided by University of Missouri Extension in Cedar Hill brought 90 people interested in gardening. After the program at Hillermann’s I spoke with Scott Hillermann and he was surprised at the turnout. He said that in the past educational programs rarely attracted more than 20-25 people. Some are suggesting that people are looking to gardening as a way to cut costs by producing their own food. For those who have never planted a seed there will likely be lots of questions and Master Gardeners can play a role in getting these questions answered. I look forward to hearing your stories about questions you receive this year from novice gardeners.

Matt

2009 Calendar of Events

Thanks to the members of our steering committee who have put together an interesting and diverse agenda for the year:

March—Irrigation System with Phil Klemme
April—Herbs
May—Daniel Boone Home and our Annual Plant Exchange
June—Weirich's Rose Garden
July—Lavender Farm and Kerri Kempter's Garden
September—Picnic at Lana Dinan's
October—Bulbs
November—Dried Flowers by Georgianne McClanahan
December—Holiday Party

Franklin County Steering Committee

Chairperson .........................Colleen Simons
Vice Chairperson ....................David Moll
Secretary/Treasurer .................Lana Dinan
Members at large:
    Georgianne McClanahan and Lynne Moll

Brighten Your Home with Cyclamen

Leslie Mahin
Franklin County Master Gardener

Cyclamen is a beautiful indoor blooming plant with spectacular color. This compact plant has dense deep green heart shaped leaves with lacy silver markings. The swept back flowers rise gracefully above the foliage on slender stems and will bloom nonstop for several months. Colors range from deep iridescent red to soft pastels. Brighten your home by putting cyclamen in colorful pots and baskets. They are perfect on a desk, coffee table or countertop.

Keeping your cyclamen in bright indirect light and cooler temperatures will extend the life of its colorful blooms. Take care not to let the soil dry out. Keep soil moist but not soggy. Allow the soil to drain after watering before returning it to its decorative container.

Yard Clean Up Made Easier

Sandy Williams
Franklin County Master Gardener

Big leaves, such as sycamore and maple mat down over the winter. This can kill grass and other plants. But these big leaves take up a lot of space in compost bins or leaf bags.

I rake my leaves to the parking strip by the street. Then I run over them with my lawn mower and the shredded leaves shoot onto the sidewalk. The hard surface makes it easy to sweep up fragments. If you are filling a lawn waste bag, you can get more leaves in each bag this way. And shredded leaves break-down faster into compost than un-shredded mulch.

If one pass with the mower isn’t enough, rake the leaves back in the grass and go over them again with the mower before sweeping them up.
Mystery Dripper
Sandy Williams, Franklin County Master Gardener

I was busy sprucing up for the annual garden tour when I noticed that a new flower bed was looking a little dull. Since the tour was a week away, I didn’t have much time to add needed color. After some pondering I came up with an ingenious ornament that brightened up the border while adding a little mystery too.

I took advantage of a bird bath that was already there and placed a shepherd’s hook behind the bath as you can see in the picture. Then I hung a colorful watering can from the hook, positioning the spout over the dish. Inside the can, I placed several blocks of ice I had frozen in plastic containers. As the ice melted, water dripped out of the spout and into the bird bath.

My last minute addition was the talk of the tour as visitors asked how my “water feature” worked.

Elsie Redford’s Legacy
Rosalie M Laune, Franklin County Master Gardener

In late September I spent a week in Quebec Province, Canada. I began my tour in Montreal; from there we traveled overnight on the Canadian Rail Chaleur to the Gaspe Peninsula.

We all had sleeper cars with pull out beds, which I can only describe as sleeping in a drawer. Our tour ended in Quebec City. The autumn foliage throughout our travels was gorgeous. The maple trees were at the height of their color with leaves as brilliant as that on the Canadian flag.

Included in the tour was a visit to the Jardins de Métis (Redford Gardens). The gardens were the inspiration of Elsie Redford. Elsie grew up as the only child of parents with modest means. However, her parents valued education and Elsie attended private schools. She also married well. Her husband was Lord Mount Stephen.

After a midlife illness, she was encouraged by her doctor to take up gardening. Although she had no formal training in horticulture, she educated herself and between 1926 and 1958 built one of the most original gardens in North America. She succeeded in adapting rare species to the harsh local conditions. These included the Himalayan blue poppy, the gardens’ distinctive emblem. There are more than 3000 species and varieties of plants from all corners of the world growing in this horticultural paradise. In recent years the gardens have been somewhat neglected, and efforts are now underway to restore them.

Although we visited the gardens in the last throes of the summer, we could still appreciate their scope and themes. Alas the Himalayan blue poppies were not in bloom.

Also located on the grounds is the Estevan Lodge, the summer home of Lord Mount Stephen and Elsie. It now houses exhibits of Elsie Redford endeavors and provides a glimpse into a bygone era of leisurely summers spent enjoying the natural charms of the Gaspe Peninsula. From the front veranda one can view the St. Lawrence River or follow the path leading out to it.

I must say I didn’t expect to see such extensive gardens in an environment as harsh as that of the Gaspe and really admire Elsie’s perseverance in meeting all the challenges she must have encountered. I was rather amused during our travels, when our very knowledgeable tour guide told us the people of the Gaspe like the winters and even become disgruntled when the temperatures reach the 70’s or 80’s in summer. There is an old adage in the Gaspe: There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing.
Are You a Bird Watcher or a Birder?
Lynne Moll, Franklin County Master Gardener

This is how Jim Jackson began our February Master Gardener meeting. His answer made me realize I am a bird watcher in the beginning process of becoming a birder—with a long way to go! Everyone watches birds but birders keep records and can even become pretty obsessed with things “bird.” That takes a lot of learning and observation. Jim Jackson began as a young man and shared some of his knowledge with us, especially as it relates to bird behaviors.

Using the robin as the norm, he told of their migration, territoriality, nesting habits, and incubation behaviors. It seems like there are a lot of robins this winter, and they come down from Canada so we have them all winter. They use their songs to defend their nesting territory and also to attract a female mate. Sometimes their songs are also used for bonding the mates with the babies in the nest. Research also shows that songbirds must learn their songs. We have all enjoyed finding a robin’s nest which is distinctive with its mud lining. They lay four to five eggs and don’t incubate them until all are laid, so that they will all hatch at the same time. They incubate by using a brood patch on their breast which is an area of no feathers that folds over the eggs. Song birds are altricial (new word to all!) because they incubate a short time and the birds are born naked and helpless.

From these basics about robins, Jim expanded, sharing behavioral habits of other birds. It was a great time to ask questions from such a knowledgeable local authority.

February is “Bird Month” so the Missouri Botanical Gardens offered classes on Saturday, February 7 which we attended. Actually, this was our second year and this made me realize what a beginner I really am. I took the exact same class on bird songs from Chris Brown that I took last year, and I’m sure I still don’t recognize any more songs than last year. What he presented on power point and audio built on the foundations that Jim laid about bird songs. Yes, many birds do learn their songs, although their calls are intuitive. Calls are generally simple and are used for distress, flight warnings, or food location. They are higher pitched than the songs, which are meant to be heard over a greater distance. Spring migration is the best time of year to hear bird songs, and predawn is the best time of day. This is when they have their “duels” for multiple purposes. I will never forget a camping trip where we heard a predawn bird song festival that was loud and magnificent! Chris explained that birds have two voice boxes (syrinx) deep in the chest and they can use one or both at the same time for their songs. They learn their songs from their fathers, neighbors, the sounds of their environment, or they improvise on their own. Actually, they can only learn their songs during their hatching year; they don’t sing over winter and then the next spring they start practicing and expanding their repertoire. And they will only learn their own signature song—not any others. Their repertoire may be just a few songs to over 2000 in the brown thrasher. Now I know why I don’t know that many—there are so many variables!

Scott Woodbury from Shaw Nature Reserve taught a class called “Gardening for Birds” that was new for him and quite informative. He took us through the garden by season, starting in winter, to show us what plants attract which birds. His power point presentation included pictures of many plants from the Nature Reserve with birds that visit them. He pointed out how each part of a plant adds to the environmental needs of birds—their thorns for protection, their limbs for perching, their seeds, berries, and nectar for food, etc. Even bark is important for woodpeckers to hide acorns. My husband, Dave, took a bird photography class that told how a bubbling fountain in a rock in a suburban neighborhood has attracted over 130 species of birds in the last eight years.

This year we want to be part of the Great Backyard Bird Count that takes place each year on Presidents’ Day Weekend. The website for this is birdcount.org. In 2007 9.8 million birds were counted in North America, 635 species, and 85,000 checklists from just citizens who want to help gather this important data for scientists to learn more about birds. It’s really simple. You download a form to report what you see from whatever place you choose in any fifteen minute period. There a few questions to answer to help verify data. Right now we don’t seem to be having many birds at our feeders but during the recent “snow days” we had time to “sit back and enjoy the show” of a fairly large number of our favorite songbirds. I suppose that counts as only bird watching, so we are also happy to be able to take part in the Great Backyard Bird Count as real birders!
Sometimes even the most mundane situations can elicit a totally different response when communicated through the eyes of a child. And so it was on that warm January afternoon, a sixty degree afternoon in fact. It was one of those rare but oh so delightful days that seem to appear from nowhere yet afford a welcome interlude in the otherwise long winter saga.

It is always an adventure to spend time with my grandchildren and that day was no exception. My four year old granddaughter, Avery, was playing hostess to her brother and me as we participated in yet another tea party. Quite suddenly her attention was drawn to a small wooly creature slowly meandering its way across the patio. “Grandma, what’s that?” she asked, unable to control the excitement in her voice. My goodness, it’s a wooly worm. What’s it doing out now? My limited knowledge of wooly worms not withstanding, I surely thought it should be firmly entrenched somewhere, not roaming around in the middle of winter. Well, the tea party ended abruptly as full attention was now bestowed upon the little creature by Avery and her brother.

So captivated were they that it was soon surmised that a wooly worm cannot be truly appreciated at such a distance. Grandma, can you bring it in here? Of course I can. That’s what grandma’s are for—retrieving bugs. Ever so gently, picking up this newfound treasure, I noticed how cold its underbelly was. Placing it in her hand, I noted the look of wonderment on her face. Almost immediately she began stroking its prickly back and reassuring it that we meant it no harm. I had to marvel as I observed Avery and her brother holding and stroking it how one of God’s simplest creations could elicit such a response. Had I ever been so captivated by a wooly worm—too long ago for me to remember.

Questions soon arose. Was it a girl or a boy? A girl I thought. At least there was a fifty percent chance of that. What should we name her? We settled on Abigail. And so, on a comfortable bed of leaves, Abigail enjoyed a sleep over in Avery’s room.

Sadly, all good things do end, and it was decided by my daughter, Avery’s mother, that Abigail could not be a permanent member of the family. It would be far better for her to reside in grandma’s greenhouse. Of course, didn’t I mention, that’s what grandmas do best, babysit wooly worms.

Upon arriving at my home, I placed Abigail in the greenhouse with some leaves and water. I did not know what her culinary preferences might be and where would I find them in the dead of winter anyway? I did notice that she was not very active, and that concerned me. The phone rang. It was my daughter wanting an update on Abigail. I decided I needed to check out a wooly worm website and try to obtain some much needed information.

I was amazed at the vast amount of information the internet provided. After reading that it needs cold, protection, and a safe place to spin its cocoon, I decided what would probably be best for Abigail. Well, it certainly was cold enough as I emerged into the frosty morning air. A safe place—hmm—I decided that the foundation of my greenhouse basement would work. Gently placing her there and covering her with some dry leaves, I left her to fend for herself. I hoped she would survive to construct her cocoon next spring. I will probably never know. However, next spring I will be diligently looking for a white moth who answers to the name of Abigail.

Some facts about wooly worms:

- They overwinter as larva
- They prefer to feed on violets or lambs quarter
- They grow 1-3 inches and are found throughout the United States
- Wooly worm is a common name for the Isabella Tiger Moth
- There is no scientific evidence suggesting that wooly worms can predict weather